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AUTHOR Armstrong, Karen
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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the phenomenon "response to literature" through the window of language to determine how different researchers assigned meaning to this central concept in twentieth century research. The benchmark conceptions of the terms "literature" and "response" (with which the research conceptions could be compared) were delineated. The choices of the researcher appeared to be three: to focus either on the text, on the reader, or on the response process itself. Two hundred and fourteen studies which explored the responses of subjects 18 years of age or older were examined to determine the general emphasis towards conceptions of "literature" and "response." Three primary categories of response emerged: text-oriented, reader-oriented, and response-oriented. Prior to the war years of the 1940s, the focus of research was text-oriented. During the 1950s, there was an uneasy equilibrium between text- and reader-oriented studies. The 1960s witnessed a research focus on the reader. During the 1970s and 1980s, the predominant research orientation turned to a transactional or response-centered focus. Findings refute the common perception of a confused plurality of research results and suggests evidence of a shift in focus from the text to the reader to the response process itself. (One summary table of research characteristics is included; 50 references are attached.) (RS)

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RESPONSE TO LITERATURE: A RETROSPECTIVE LOOK AT THE RESEARCH

Paper presented by

Karen Armstrong Eberdt (now Karen Armstrong)

at the

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INTRODUCTION

It has been said that Kuhn (1970) in his Structure of Scientific revolutions, used the word "paradigm" in twenty-one different ways. Similarly, the phrase "response to literature" has meanings of vast dimensions in the research. The types of literature used include novels (e.g. Wilson, 1966); non-fiction books (e.g. Schneck, 1946); short stories (e.g. Dollerop, 1971); poems (e.g. Kintgen & Holland, 1984); plays (e.g. Beach, 1985); single words (e.g. Bruner & Postman, 1947); meaningless syllables (e.g. Roblee & Washburn, 1912); newspaper and magazine articles (e.g. Gray, 1947); film (e.g. Weber, 1973) and comprehension test items (e.g. Davis, 1944).

Similarly, there is great variety in the types of response elicited. Some researchers ask their subjects to recognize single value-laden words, presented one at a time (Bruner & Postman, 1947). Another asks them to read books in order to help them with anxiety

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(Wilson, 1951). Yet another asks his readers to draw pictures before and after reading a poem to see if the poem had any effect on creativity (Roberts, 1968). Still another asks his readers to read poems aloud while their arms and legs are hooked up to machines measuring the degree of muscular activity (Strother, 1949). Finally another researcher asks readers to discuss literature in groups under various different conditions (Beach, 1972).

This enormous variety of explorations is, not surprisingly, reflected in the myriad results of this research about which Cooper (1976) cautions that "there is no reason to despair because so many studies tell us so little with absolute certainty" (p. 88). In fact, however, such plurality causes problems for both reader and researcher. The concern arises as to whether this research is indeed merely a discordant cacophony of perspectives. Purves (1985), suggests that it is not. He proposes instead that "early research was based on I.A. Richards (1929) Practical criticism which tended to follow from the premise of hermeneutics that the literary text contained a verifiable essence". Next, he points out that following the influence of Wellek and Warren came the Freudians and the ensuing shift in attention to the reader. In these few words is the suggestion of a pattern in the research, an as-yet inchoate order beneath the confusion. It is this sense of pattern that I chose to explore in the dissertation upon which this paper is based (Eberdt, 1990).

PROCEDURE

The first step was to delineate benchmark conceptions of the terms "literature" and "response" with which the research conceptions could be compared. Using a variety of major dictionaries including the Oxford English Dictionary (1989) and Webster's (1988),

meanings of the word "literature" seemed united by the focus on literature as printed matter, which is not surprising considering that it is derived from the Latin "litera", meaning letter. "Excellence in writing" was a second important meaning. Finally, the meaning with the least consensus, although it is popular in pedagogical circles, is the reference to fiction.

In the exploration of theoretical discussion concerning the concept of literature, the pivotal question was whether literature was found or made by the reader. That is, are we speaking of works by Shelley and Shakespeare or are we also including advertisements and found poems?

From this consideration of foundation conceptions as derived from dictionaries and theoretical discussions of the terms, it seemed that the researcher had several options: 1) to use single printed words; 2) to use any connected discourse, regardless of quality or genre; 3) to use any genre as long as it was considered excellent; or 4) to ignore all conventional theoretical meanings and employ film, television or oral conversation.

As concerns "response", the word was first used in the simple sense of an answer or reply in about 1300. It gradually acquired ecclesiastical, musical, psychological and even recreational overtones. Its most constant sense is an answer to some question or stimulus.

This was too general a foundation from which to view research conceptions and so discussion was made more relevant by exploring theoretical discussions concerning the ways in which real readers read. Three orientations along the text-response-reader continuum are generally recognized as distinct perspectives of "response to literature": 1)

the text-oriented New Criticism associated with names such as Brooks, Wellek, Warren and Ransom about which group Jones (1977) says: "The New Criticism . . . saw the ideal reader as a sort of Lockean tabula rasa to whom the text, upon careful scrutiny, revealed its complexities. Interpretation then became essentially a discovery of meanings already encoded in the text."

The second perspective, Subjective criticism, associated with names such as Lesser, Bleich and Holland, sees the text "as a relatively neutral phenomenon, a Rorschach blot to which the reader reacted according to the reader's ego-structure" (Purves, 1985). "No matter who makes the critical judgment - no matter how impeccable his reputation for 'objectivity' - there is an unarticulated emotional basis." says David Bleich (1969), a subjective critic.

Finally, the response or transactive orientation associated with names such as Fish, Iser and Rosenblatt offers yet a third way of perceiving response to literature. Rosenblatt (1938) describes "the interaction between the reader and the book as a process that may be compared to the interacting of two chemical compounds" (33-4). In 1978, she reiterates, using the word 'transaction', derived from Dewey and Bentley (1949), to explain that "as with the elements of an electric circuit, each component of the reading process functions by virtue of the presence of others."

I explored each of these theoretical orientations, suggesting not only differences but also seeking underlying similarities among them, for I was struck by what Stephen Pepper (1942) says of his world hypotheses that "these interpretations are so convincing that a man

who has not had an opportunity to compare them with the parallel interpretations of a rival hypothesis will inevitably accept them as self-evident or indubitable" (p. 99). The choices of the researcher derived from this theoretical discussion appeared to be three: a focus on the text, on the reader, or on the response process itself.

The next step, after theoretical issues were established, consisted of a close examination of the research studies themselves. Titles of possible studies were derived from the major bibliographies of research on response to literature (Beach & Hynds, 1989; Purves & Beach, 1972; Beach & Appleman, 1983; Cooper, 1971, 1976; Galda, 1982, 1983; Klemenz-Belgardt, 1981; Applebee, 1978; Petrosky, 1977). From this initial list of titles, a more focused list was derived. This list, restricted to adult subjects, consisted of 214 studies which explored the responses of those subjects eighteen years of age or older. The age criterion led to the inclusion of studies which explored the responses of grade twelve students, college students and adults not attending college. Apart from its intrinsic interest, research with this age group is considered significant in a larger sense. From a developmental point of view, the responses of adult readers are considered an important point of reference for work with children and adolescents (Applebee, 1978).

Because the interest was not in the results but in the questions and conditions through which the results were filtered, these 214 studies were then examined in order to determine the general emphasis towards conceptions of "literature" and "response". This was derived from the following aspects: 1) rationale of the study; 2) research question; 3) description of the response task; 4) reasons for the choice of literary work; and, in the few cases when

they were counter-intuitive, 6) explanation of the results. It is important to note that the aim, in this reading, was to derive the researcher's meaning of 'response' and 'literature' solely from explicit or implicit knowledge in the written report of research. In order to insure validity, each report, article and dissertation was re-read and categorized afresh three different times, separated by intervals of six weeks or more.

Three primary categories of response emerged: there were those studies which presented literary merit as an intrinsic textual quality and focused on the formal elements of literature such as sound and rhythm. I classified these as text-oriented. There emerged a second group which focused on aspects such as using literature to view the reader's personality, to explore developmental differences in various readers or to change the reader: these I classified as reader-oriented. Finally, were those which focused on the components, process of response and the effects of different stances, contexts and teaching techniques on response. These I classified as response-oriented.

RESULTS

Insert Table 1 about here

To turn to the results (see Table 1), research on response to literature began in 1912 with the first study cited by Purves and Beach at a time when both Canada and the United States were making the transition from agricultural to industrial countries. Roblee and Washburn (1912) in their study, "The affective value of articulate sounds", ask their

subjects to listen to various syllables and to judge the pleasantness or unpleasantness on a scale from one to seven. The reasoning behind this earliest experiment was that "apart from the associative power of words, the sounds which compose them may, by their own pleasantness or unpleasantness, exert a not inconsiderable influence on their literary value from an aesthetic viewpoint."

In the next decade, similarly, the focus was text-oriented. However, published literature was used in its natural form. An example of a text-oriented study from this decade is that of Abbott and Trabue (1921), who sought to measure "the degree of success attained in developing the power to appreciate". The test was to read four different versions of a stanza including sentimental, prosaic and metrical alterations as well as the original and thus 'best' version.

During the thirties, the latter part of the decade witnessing the rise of New Criticism in college English classrooms, most of the studies stressed appreciation which "rests upon discrimination - upon the ability to distinguish the good from the less good and the less good from the very bad. He sums up: the man who does not recognize good prose when he sees it can hardly be said to possess appreciative ability" (Carroll, 1933).

During the war years of the forties, at the end of which veterans flocked to the campuses in droves, research conceptions of response included explorations of reading interest and taste, effects of reading on voting practices, a description of the literature and beliefs of oral cultures and bibliotherapy studies which explored how the reading of literature could change the reader's attitudes and behavior. It was during this decade as well

that literal comprehension was first explicitly included as part of response to literature (Davis, 1944).

During the fifties, there was an uneasy equilibrium between text and reader oriented studies. An example of a text-oriented study from this decade is that of Schubert (1953) who gave his subjects the IOWA silent reading test and then had them rank four selections in order of literary quality in order to explore the relationship between reading ability and literary appreciation. A reader-oriented study from this decade is that of Wilson (1951) who gave an adult patient nonfiction books such as Release from nervous tension and Victory over fear to relieve anxiety. Nonfiction texts and short stories appear for the first time during this decade under the rubric of literature.

The tumultuous sixties witnessed a research focus on the reader. Holdsworth (1968) sought to determine if the vicarious experience of reading a book could influence the attitudes of nursing students toward comatose patients. She gave her subjects an autobiographical novel which described the experiences of a semiconscious patient.

During the seventies and eighties the predominant research orientation turned to a transactional or response-centred focus. Morris (1970) has college students tell their immediate and growing impressions while reading a poem, then summarize the meaning of the poem and answer questions concerning the typicalness, completeness and quality of the response just given. Wade-Maltais (1981) explored whether a group of community college students' public responses would converge toward the text or the reader when no audience expectations were provided. New directions as well appeared during this decade: the first

serious studies of ludic reading (Nell, 1988; Radway, 1984); and Jacobsen's (1982) study of psychic space. Jacobsen asks her subjects: "Where do you feel you are during the reading? In contrast to your usual sense of yourself? Draw a picture or diagram of yourself reading the passage."

Thus, this exploration investigated the phenomenon "response to literature" through the window of language to determine how different researchers assigned meaning to this central concept in twentieth century research (Eberdt, 1990). This exploration importantly took as its focus, not the results, but the research questions themselves. The analysis refutes the common perception of a confused plurality and suggests evidence of a shift in focus from the text to the reader to the response process itself.

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TABLE 1. SUMMARY TABLE OF RESEARCH CHARACTERISTICS: 1910-89

DECADE	NUMBER OF STUDIES	RESPONSE FOCUS	"LITERATURE" REPRESENTED BY
1910-9	2	TEXT (100%)	meaningless syllables, lines derived from fine poetry
1920-9	6	TEXT (67%) reader (33%)	poems (67%), single words (17%), variety of genres (17%)
1930-9	12	TEXT (83%) reader (8%) response (8%)	poems (50%), prose excerpts (25%), transmogrified poetry (8%), novels (8%), literature as a general concept (8%)
1940-9	23	READER (65%) text (26%) response (4%) poet (4%)	greatest diversity: poems (17%), comprehension test items (13%), novels (13%), mixed genres (13%), single words (9%), newspaper articles and political pamphlets (4%), magazines and books (4%), oral stories (4%), fairy tales (4%), library books (4%), non-fiction books (4%), researcher-written children's story (4%), oral stories (4%)
1950-9	21	TEXT and READER (43% each) response (10%) author (5%)	prose passages (33%), poems (19%), non-fiction books (14%), literature as a general concept (10%), play segments (5%), oral stories (5%), comprehension test items (5%), short stories (5%)
1960-9	35	READER (54%) response (26%) text (17%) author (3%)	poems (34%), prose passages (17%), unspecified literary works (17%), short stories (11%), mixed genres (9%), novels ((6%), plays (3%), psychiatric case histories (3%)
1970-9	50	RESPONSE (60%) reader (28%) text (10%)	short stories (36%) poems (34%), mixed genres (10%) literature as a general concept (6%), dramatic text (6%), film (2%), prose excerpts (4%) , nonfiction books (4%)
1980-9	64	RESPONSE (55%) reader (31%) text (14%)	short stories (43%), poems (34%), prose passages (5%), dramatic text (2%), "books with a lesson" (2%), mixed genres (5%), novels (5%), researcher devised text (5%)

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